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The EU Policy Agendas Project

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22.1 The EU Political System

The European Union traces its origin from the European Economic Community, established by the Treaty of Rome (1957). Integration began among six European countries in a narrow range of policy domains and has expanded tremendously over the last decades. At the time of writing, the Union encompasses twenty-eight member states and has competences in a wide spectrum of areas. The Treaty of Lisbon (2007) formally lists these competences distinguishing among exclusive jurisdictions, those shared with the member states, domains where the European Union ensures coordination, and actions to support, coordinate, or supplement those of the member states. Early scholars of European integration spent much time discussing the nature of the "beast" as the European Union is neither clearly a state nor just an international organization. Nowadays, there is a consensus that in terms of its political system the Union can serve as a case in comparative research (Hix and Høyland, 2011). Nevertheless, this system is distinct in some complex features designed to balance different interests and structure the flow of ideas.

The European Commission is a EU executive body with an administrative apparatus. It is led by a president and structured along thematic departments, called Directorates General. The Commission has multiple responsibilities, most notably it oversees compliance with EU treaties, implements EU policies, and prepares the drafts of legislative proposals. It is the only EU institution, which can officially table legislative proposals but informally other actors can exercise influence over this process. Therefore, the Commission needs to consider the views of the other core institutions in order to ensure the feasibility of adoption. The Commission also launches different non-legislative initiatives, coming out in the form of Green Papers, White Papers, reports, etc.

Once a legislative proposal is drafted, it is placed on the agenda of the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. The Parliament originates from the Treaty of Rome but its members began to be directly elected in 1979. In the earlier years of European integration, the powers of the Parliament were limited both in terms of level of engagement (more often a consultative than a decision-maker role) and scope of policy areas in which it had a say. This changed substantively with the introduction and subsequent expansion of the co-legislative procedure, where the Council and the Parliament share equal powers. Therefore, these two institutions are seen as representing a bicameral legislature. The members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are elected from party lists at the member-state level with each country having a designated seat quota. However, most of these parties belong to EU-wide party federations and MEPs generally vote along party lines (e.g., Hix and Høyland, 2011).

The Council of Ministers has different thematic formations. The ten configurations, which currently exist, meet regularly but the number of meetings differs in accordance with the topics that need to be discussed and decided upon. Each formation consists of the twenty-eight responsible ministers for the respective topic in the member states. Today, the standard voting rule in the Council is qualified majority voting though some domains still require unanimity. Besides its legislative function, the Council is also responsible for coordinating member states' policies in several fields, including economic and fiscal policies, education, culture, sport, youth and employment policy. The preparation and chairing of Council meetings is a task of the rotating six-month country presidency.[1]

The European Council originated in the 1970s as an informal body, where the heads of state and government of all member states could discuss in a closed environment any matter of European integration. Nowadays, it is formally responsible for defining the overall priorities and directions for development of the European Union, thereby having a crucial role in agenda-setting. Over the course of its existence, the European Council has intensified both the regularity of its summits and the degree of engagement with specific policy issues. Until the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force the rotating country presidency used to be in charge of coordinating and chairing the European Council meetings. Ever since, this role has been taken up by a President of the European Council, appointed for a two-and-half year term with a possible single extension.

As the EU competencies vary across policy areas, so do some arrangements for policymaking. Particularly important in this respect is the domain of foreign and security policy, where the European Council provides guidelines based on which the Council of Ministers develops specific policies. The differentiated level of integration in some areas, most notably the Economic

and Monetary Union has also triggered special institutional arrangements. Launched in 1998, an equivalent of the Economic and Financial Affairs (Eco-Fin) Council but consisting only of Eurozone member states' ministers—the Eurogroup—gathers informally before EcoFin meetings. Following two sporadic events in the aftermath of the global economic and financial crisis, since 2011 the European Council has also been meeting in a configuration consisting only of the Eurozone Heads of State or Government, known as the Euro Summit.

22.2 EU Policy Agendas Datasets

The first and so far only complete and released dataset of the EUPAP covers the agenda of the European Council. It includes all Conclusions (as well as statements and declarations) issued following meetings of the body between the first summit in 1975 and the end of 2014. The Conclusions are the only document produced by the European Council. They are published after all formal and often also after informal summits. The coding unit of the dataset is quasi-sentence, identifying the lowest possible level of issue attention. Policy issues are classified using the EUPAP codebook. Besides the policy issue variable, the dataset covers a range of "demographic" identifiers, such as the place and closing date of the meeting as well as multiple dummy variables. The coding was performed manually by pairs of trained students. Disagreements were discussed and resolved by the project leaders, working together in cases of more complex issues. As this was the first EUPAP dataset, the codebook was refined during the coding process (for a detailed description of the dataset see Alexandrova et al., 2014).

Currently, there are several more datasets in preparation within the EUPAP or following the EUPAP agenda classification approach. One of them focuses on the other core executive body—the European Commission. The project aims to categorize the topics on the agenda of this institution in the period 1995–2014 (a partial version of the dataset has been used in Alexandrova, 2017). The unit of analysis are documents issued by the Commission and the dataset allows distinguishing between the legislative and the non-legislative branches of the agenda. The coding is done manually by pairs of trained students, and all disagreements are settled in a discussion with the project leader. Each document receives a single main topic code but a secondary coding approach is also pursued, whereby all substantially relevant further codes are identified. The data is derived from EurLex and includes different variables on the time and context of each document (e.g., date of submission to the Council, responsible Directorate General, decision procedure in the College, etc.).

Another dataset (funded through the Europolix and Legipar ANR projects) aims to categorize the agenda of the European Parliament, focusing on questions for written answer submitted to the European Commission and the Council by MEPs. It contains all 84,170 such questions submitted between September 1, 1994 and October 1, 2011. The coding of issue attention via the EUPAP codebook is done manually for a large subsample and the remaining part is coded automatically via RTextTools (Jurka et al., 2012) using the question headlines. The dataset also includes information on the date of submission, the official registration number, and the name of the question author as well as his/her affiliation to a political group and nationality. In the case of multiple authors, a dummy variable is included and the assignment of nationality and political group is applied to the first author mentioned.

The EUPAP project has evolved into a decentralized network and the popularity of the coding approach has inspired the development of new datasets by scholars not directly linked to the project. One such example is a dataset on the Council working party meetings, which are organized by the rotating presidency. These working parties prepare the agendas for the different Council formation meetings and in many cases make decisions, which are subsequently only approved by the Council. The dataset takes a different perspective from the standard one in the agendas community, where the topics of attention are deduced from statements in policy documents. The topics here represent the thematic focus of the working party and the level of attention is captured via the meeting duration. The dataset covers over seventy thousand meetings in the period 1995–2014 (Häge, 2016).

Beyond the study of institutional agendas, attempts have been made to disentangle the public agenda in the European Union. Capturing the public agenda is a complex task, considering that the European Union does not have a common public sphere. One way around this problem is to consider the aggregate expression of public concerns among the citizens in all EU member states. Such data is available in the Standard Eurobarometer (EB) surveys issued by the European Commission. Since 2003 these surveys have regularly reported on the question of which (up to two) most important issues are facing the respondent's country at the moment of enquiry. Although the list of issues, which could be selected by the participants is not comprehensive and has changed over time, this data source represents the best existing longitudinal measure of EU public opinion (Alexandrova, Rasmussen, and Toshkov, 2016). The EUPAP project has compiled a small dataset of all aggregate EU data on the most important issues question from the Standard EB, and linked it to the applicable issue codes.

The research interest in the study of citizen priorities often focuses on the overall prioritization of problems, whereby scholars rely on data compiled by governing institutions. However, the questions on which opinion is being

Table 22.1. Datasets using the EUPAP approach

Policy venue	Data type	Unit of coding	No.	Period	State of dataset	Responsible scholar
European Council	Conclusions	Quasi-sentence	50,580	1975–mid-2017	Available	Petya Alexandrova
European Commission	All issued documents	Document	Over 11,800	1995–2014	In preparation	Petya Alexandrova
European Parliament	MEP questions for written answer to the Commission and the Council	Question	84,170	01.09.1994–01.10.2011	In preparation	Sylvain Brouard
Council working groups	Meetings	Meeting duration	72,277	1995–2014	Available	Frank Häge
Public opinion	Most important issue question in Standard Eurobarometer (EB) surveys	Issue on the list of possible issues (EU aggregate prioritization)	395*	2003–mid-2017	Available	Petya Alexandrova
Production of public opinion by the Commission	Special EB surveys	Special EB survey	303	1970–2014	In preparation	Markus Haverland

Note: * The time series is unbalanced and incomplete because the list of issues from which citizens could select has been changing over time.

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—European Union

collected are determined by the policy venue seeking this information (even if its collection is commissioned to third parties). Therefore, the study of public opinion has a further dimension. The issues on which the expression of opinion is sought constitute an agenda themselves. Such is the case with the Special EB surveys released by the European Commission. Currently, a dataset on all special EBs produced between 1970 and 2014 is in development. The main topic of each EB report is coded manually by two researchers working independently and using the EUPAP codebook. The dataset includes further information, such as the Directorate General commissioning the survey (Haverland, de Ruiter, and Van de Walle, 2018).

Table 22.1 list all datasets using the EUPAP approach that have been developed or are currently in preparation, together with dataset specification, contact persons, and references (where applicable).

22.3 Specificities

The codebook of the EUPAP has been designed following the examples of other country projects in the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) network. This means that the codebook is not organized around policy area distinctions determined by the EU competence catalogue. Rather than being a limitation, this approach has two important advantages. First, it allows for comparisons with other political systems irrespective of the scope and distribution of jurisdictional authority. Second, it provides the opportunity to measure the lack of attention to policy issues, which constitutes a very important aspect of agenda-setting, referred to as "non-decisions" (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). In other words, the codebook features a list of topics that could only vaguely if at all be associated with EU competences. The fact that a particular institution avoids such issues would provide evidence for jurisdictional authority from an agenda-setting perspective. This would then also reflect the changing scope and extent of EU competences over the course of European integration. However, EU institutions do not engage only with issues within their jurisdictional capacity and the boundaries of the latter are often vague. The main reason for this is that in the European Union issues often need to be framed in a way that indicates their "Europeanness" in order to be successful in gaining the attention of policymakers (Princen, 2009). Therefore, a broader perspective to the range of potential issues is pertinent to understanding agenda-setting processes in the European Union.

Furthermore, the EUPAP codebook contains a set of specific sub-codes, relevant for the EU context such as the single market, common organization of agricultural markets, or cohesion and structural funds. In the Master Codebook these issue codes are clustered with the "general" codes in the

corresponding category (business and finance, agriculture, and regional policy for the three examples above respectively). Other sub-codes represent split versions of sub-codes in the Master Codebook. For example, the EU codebook contains three separate issue codes for relations between the European Union and national, regional, and local authorities, which appear under a single sub-code for intergovernmental relations in the Master Codebook. For two of the EU-specific topics—enlargement and cohesion policy—dummies allow us to consider broader references to these domains whenever the coded topic is only a specific aspect of it (for an example on the European Council see Alexandrova et al., 2014).

Additionally, the EUPAP has a particular approach to foreign affairs (adopted in only some of the CAP country projects). Here dummy variables allow us to classify broad references to relations between the European Union and third countries in specific policy areas (e.g., visa liberalization towards Ukraine), discussions of developments within specific policy domains in third countries (e.g., healthcare reform in Russia) and EU positions on issues within global governance (e.g., international measures against climate change). A similar approach is taken to categorizing internal policy aspects of a specific member state (e.g., adoption of the Euro currency by Slovenia).

22.4 An Example

Figure 22.1 presents an example of EUPAP data. It shows a comparison between three datasets on the issue of terrorism (both domestic and international terrorism, which fall under major topics law and crime, and international affairs respectively). The figure covers the period 2003–13, on which data from all three sources is available. The plot is on biannual basis and presents attention by the European Council as proportion of all quasi-sentences in the Conclusions, attention by the Commission as share of all documents issued, and the segment of the EU population that considers the issue to be one of the two most important ones facing their country at the moment of enquiry. It is clear that terrorism is an issue that the European Commission hardly deals with as it occupies up to 1 percent of its agenda. This is in line with jurisdictional divisions in the European Union. For the European Council, this issue is more salient but attention is episodic, which seems to suggest that specific terrorist attacks within the European Union and abroad trigger reactions. However, the pattern in European Council attention and the issue prioritization by the public appear to be strongly associated. In fact, research has demonstrated tentative evidence of a responsiveness effect in this institution when controlling for the number of terrorist attacks within a given period (Alexandrova, Rasmussen, and Toshkov, 2016).
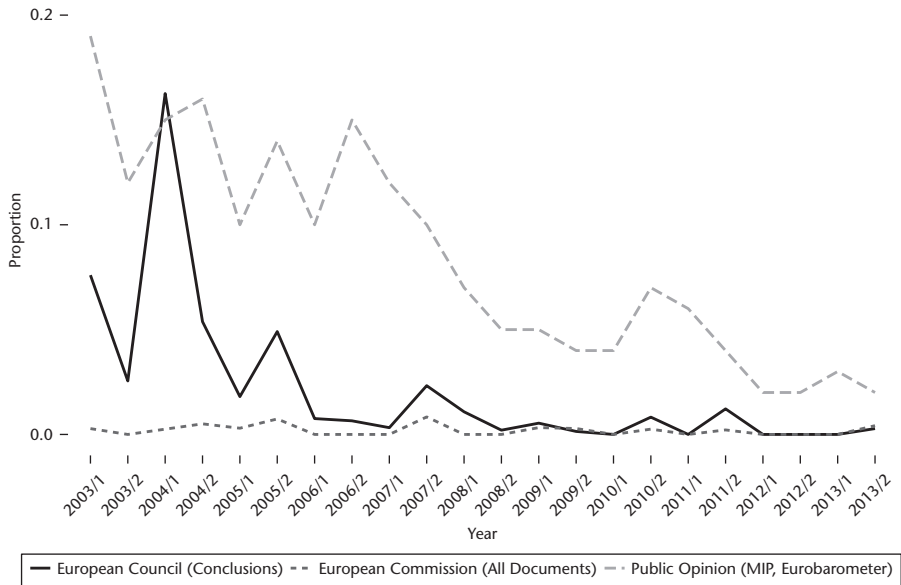
Figure 22.1. Relative attention to terrorism on the agendas of the European Council, European Commission, and EU citizens

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—European Union

Note

1. The only exception is the Foreign Affairs Council, which is chaired by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (who since the Treaty of Lisbon is also a Vice-President of the European Commission).

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